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BY ROGER K. LEWIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

SHAPING THE CITY

Roger K. Lewis

The Courage of Planning

Other than raising taxes, few local government actions provoke as much political controversy as revising a long-range master plan, no matter how visionary the result. Yet visionary plans setting forth new land-use and transportation patterns are indispensable for managing growth.

Witness the controversy swirling around long-range-planning visions contemplated for portions of Montgomery, Prince George's and Fairfax counties. In every locality, within and beyond the Beltway, the same issues dominate the controversy: density and traffic.

People naturally resist change and cling to the status quo when they believe change will adversely affect their interests, especially their interest in driving unencumbered. Perceiving that increased density means increased traffic congestion, voters are understandably skeptical about any plan calling for higher densities, even if the plan also calls for transportation improvements.

Public anxiety about visionary master plans is understandable for another reason: Describing a distant and somewhat unknowable future through long-range master plans is inevitably a risk.

How can anyone be sure or guarantee that planning assumptions, predictions and concepts will be valid in 10 years, much less 50? In fact, despite all the data and quantitative analysis on which planning experts rely, and despite knowledge of current trends, planners cannot see the future with certainty, even in the short term. Thus a comprehensive plan is an aspirational gamble.

But gamble we must, as visionary master plans are necessary to create a reasonably durable framework prescribing the location and form of new development and redevelopment for generations to come.

Today's planners and urban designers generally share common aims, principles and strategies in shaping visionary master plans at all scales — county or town, city or suburb. They seek to mitigate the costs of inefficient sprawl; to concentrate denser, mixed uses in areas well served by roads, transit and utilities; to redevelop dysfunctional urban and suburban properties, such as obsolete strip shopping centers and "brown fields"; and to increase affordable-housing opportunities.

Comprehensive master plans guide zoning policies and regulations as well as the deployment of public services and infrastructure. While aspiring to alter dysfunctional land-use patterns, master plans should respect and protect stable neighborhoods along

with valuable public open space. And they provide a long-term context essential for private-sector real estate investment.

To appreciate the difficulty of crafting a master plan, imagine that you are its author. You must take into account a daunting array of research data and forecasts: population and demographic projections — compositional shifts, for example, among families with children, elderly retirees and singles; personal income; business activity and jobs; tax revenues; housing types and preferences; transportation demand and optional travel modes, and public service needs such as education, health, safety and recreation.

Your plan must help sustain the health of natural and built environments, reduce energy and natural resource consumption, and be economically viable over time. Equally important, it must produce an aesthetically attractive community in which to live, work, conduct business and enjoy leisure activities.

Finally — and this is the hardest and most controversial task — your plan must anticipate evolving conditions and satisfy unprecedented needs certain to arise decades in the future. It cannot address only today's problems or respond only to the wishes of today's citizenry.

Your grandchildren and great-grandchildren will inhabit a different environment. Their values and concerns, their modes of living, their behavior and their technologies will not match yours. In 2050, their cars may be much smaller than yours, using little or no gasoline. They may spend more time walking, biking and using transit than driving. They may spend much of their time socializing, shopping and doing business on the Internet, not face to face.

Of course, given the inevitability of change and the risk of predictions, your visionary master plan must have some built-in flexibility enabling course corrections when predictions don't pan out.

Yet despite the merits of a plan, there always will be opponents unwilling to consider how the future could and should change. Voters tend to worry about only one thing: being stuck in ever-worsening traffic. Thus master-plan adoption ultimately depends on courageous political leaders who, unlike opponents, are willing to plan for the future and accept the risks that planning entails.

Roger K. Lewis is a practicing architect and a professor emeritus of architecture at the University of Maryland.